

PHOTONIC ASSISTED ELECTRON EMITTER DEVICE AND METHOD

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The invention is in the microelectronics field. The invention particularly concerns emitters and devices incorporating emitters.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Emitters have a wide range of potential applicability in the microelectronics field. An emitter emits electrons in response to an electrical signal. The controlled emissions form a basis to create a range of useful electrical and optical effects. Emitters include spindt tip cold cathode devices as well as flat emitters.

Challenges presented by spindt tip emitters include their manufacturability and stability over their service life. Manufacturing of spindt tip emitters requires a number of relatively difficult deposition steps, with the result that it is generally expensive and time consuming. Once formed, a tip may be unstable as it can change as it is operated, and is subject to damage if not operated in high vacuum.

Flat emitters are advantageous compared to spindt tip emitters because they present a larger emission surface and can be operated in less stringent vacuum environments. Flat emitters include a dielectric emission layer that responds to an electrical field created by a potential applied between an electron source and a thin metal layer on either side of a dielectric layer. Electrons tunnel from the valence band to the conduction band of the dielectric. Once into the conduction band, the electrons are accelerated towards the thin metal layer. The electrons then travel through the thin metal and exit the emitter. While flat emitters have advantages relative to spindt tip emitters, they are less efficient. It would be advantageous to improve the efficiency of flat emitters.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to an embodiment of the invention, a photonic assisted emitter includes an at least partially transparent electron source layer, a thin metal layer, and a tunneling layer disposed between said at least partially transparent electron source layer and said thin metal layer.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- FIG. 1 is a schematic cross section of an exemplary embodiment of the invention and a voltage source;
- FIG. 2 is a schematic cross section of an exemplary embodiment of the invention and a voltage source;
- FIG. 3 is a schematic cross section of an exemplary embodiment of the invention and voltage sources;
- FIG. 4 is a schematic cross section of an exemplary embodiment integrated emitter circuit of the invention;
- FIG. 5 is a schematic cross section of an exemplary embodiment emitter display device of the invention;
- FIG. 6 is a schematic cross section of a computer including exemplary embodiment emitters of the invention;
- FIG. 7 is a schematic cross section of a memory device including exemplary embodiment emitter of the invention; and
- FIG. 8 is a flow chart of an exemplary embodiment of a method the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The present invention is directed to emitters, emitter devices, methods for emitting electrons, and methods for making emitters. An exemplary method of the invention includes a two-step emission process wherein a voltage is applied across a tunneling layer disposed between a conductive transparent electron source layer and a thin metal layer, and a

surface of the tunneling layer is illuminated with photons through the conductive transparent electron source layer to enhance electron tunneling in the emitter. The term "transparent" encompasses materials that are capable of allowing photons to pass through, e.g., photon transmissible materials. It also encompasses fully and partially transparent materials that allow for some permeability to electromagnetic radiation of specified frequencies, typically in the infrared, visible, and ultraviolet ranges. Further, it encompasses opaque materials that have openings sufficient to allow for transmission of electromagnetic radiation in the form of photons. The electron emission of the emitter is controlled and modulated by both the voltage applied across the tunneling layer and the amount of photons absorbed within the tunneling layer. Although the invention is not bound to any particular theory, it is believed that the emitters described herein that use photon assisted tunneling operate by using the absorbed photon energy ($h\nu$) to effectively lower the amount of energy required to overcome the tunneling barrier.

An exemplary emitter of the invention includes a transparent source layer, a thin metal layer, and a tunneling layer disposed between the transparent source layer and a thin metal layer. Applying a voltage across the tunneling layer and illuminating the tunneling layer with photons passing through the transparent source layer enhances electron emission in the emitter by effectively lowering the amount of energy required to transit the tunneling barrier through photon absorption. Other exemplary invention embodiments may be directed to emitters, methods for making emitters, and devices incorporating an emitter, with examples including an integrated circuit, a display device, and a memory device.

Turning now to the drawings, FIG. 1 is a schematic cross section of an exemplary embodiment emitter 10. The emitter 10 includes a conductive transparent electron source layer 12, a thin metal layer 14, and a tunneling layer 16 disposed between the thin metal layer 14 and the conductive transparent electron source layer 12. The variable emitter voltage

source 18 is operatively coupled to the emitter 10 through the conductive transparent electron source layer 12 and the thin metal layer 14, to permit application of a voltage across the tunneling layer 16. Photons 20 may be used to illuminate a surface 22 of the tunneling layer 16 through the
5 conductive transparent electron source layer 12 and be absorbed, where the surface 22 is a surface of the tunneling layer 16 that is closest to the conductive transparent electron source layer 12. The photons 20 may be generally but not exclusively at visible light wavelengths, such as infrared or ultraviolet depending on the material of the tunneling layer chosen. In an
10 embodiment of the invention in which the tunneling layer 16 is disposed on the conductive transparent electron source layer 12, the surface 22 is a surface of the tunneling layer 16 that is in contact with the conductive transparent electron source layer 12. With the application of a voltage across the tunneling layer 16 and the illumination of the surface 22, electron emission
15 from the emitter 10 is enhanced.

When the photons 20 with energy $h\nu$ are absorbed by the tunneling layer, the threshold tunneling voltage of the tunneling layer 16 is effectively lowered for a given electron emission density. Lowering the threshold tunneling voltage of the tunneling layer 16 permits a higher rate of
20 emission of electrons 24 by enhancing tunneling for a given voltage from the variable emitter voltage source 18. The amount of increased emission is also determined by the quantity of photons reaching and absorbed by the tunneling layer. The source for the photons 20 may be separate from the emitter, e.g., a conventional backlight for a display device, or it may be integrated with the
25 emitter 10.

In an embodiment of the invention, the conductive transparent electron source layer 12 is an optically transparent metal oxide. In an embodiment of the invention, this metal oxide is InSnO. In an embodiment of the invention, the conductive transparent electron source layer 12 has a
30 thickness of between about 0.05 microns and about 0.3 microns. In another

embodiment of the invention, the conductive transparent electron source layer 12 has a thickness of about 0.15 microns. In another embodiment the conductive transparent electron source layer 12 is a porous opaque conductive material of various thickness. Those of skill in the art will appreciate that several different conductive and transparent materials exist and can be substituted. The important properties are that the material be conductive to allow for being an electron source, and that the material be fully or partially transparent to allow for the transmission of photons through or within the material to the tunneling layer.

In an embodiment of the invention, the tunneling layer 16 includes nodular silicon. In an embodiment of the invention, the tunneling layer has a thickness of between about 200 Å and about 1,000 Å. In another embodiment of the invention, the tunneling layer has a thickness of about 1,000 Å. Other tunneling layer materials exist and can be used, including, for example, TaO₂, SiC, Si_xN_y. Also, in addition to electron tunneling, the tunneling layer can be used to create photons. For instance, TaO₂ and Si_xN_y are also effective in creating photons as a by product of the electron tunneling thereby allowing for an active conversion of photons of one or more frequencies into photons of a different band of frequencies.

In an embodiment of the invention, an oxide layer 25 is thermally grown, deposited or otherwise disposed on the tunneling layer 16 between the tunneling layer 16 and the thin metal layer 14. In an embodiment of the invention, the oxide layer has a thickness of between about 50 Å and about 200 Å. In another embodiment of the invention, the oxide layer 25 has a thickness of about 50 Å.

FIG. 2 illustrates an emitter 27 according to an embodiment of the invention, with the variable emitter voltage source 18 operably coupled to the emitter 27. In this embodiment, the emission of the electrons 24 is further enhanced by use of a porous thin metal layer 26 with nanohole openings 28.

The nanohole openings 28 allow the electrons 24 to escape with less energy than is required to escape through a thin metal layer without openings.

In an embodiment of the invention, the porous thin metal layer 26 is made of a conductive material. In an embodiment of the invention, this
5 conductive material is platinum. In an embodiment of the invention, the thin metal layer has a thickness of between about 20 Å and about 120 Å. In another embodiment of the invention, the thin metal layer has a thickness of about 100 Å.

The nanohole openings 28 may have different shapes and still
10 be effective. The nanohole openings 28 may be circular, crack-like (having small width and longer length), fissures, voids, serpentine structures, or openings between interconnected islands of thin metal materials. The nanohole openings 28 are typically sized in terms of width (the smallest dimension), length (the largest dimension) or diameter (if roughly circular, the
15 average opening dimension). Typically, the nanohole openings 28 have absolute dimensions of less than about 200 nanometers such as between about 1 and about 100 nanometers, and typically between about 1 to about 10 nanometers for the narrowest (width) dimension and about 10 nanometers to about 100 nanometers for a length such as with cracks or fissures. Typically,
20 the porosity of the thin film material should be at least 12.5%.

The distribution of the nanohole openings 28 is typically uniform across the surface of the emitting surface (at least on average) and spaced sufficiently so that the thin metal layer maintains a contiguous electrical connection over the surface of the emitter.

25 The nanohole openings 28 can be either of a uniform size or randomly distributed in size. The spacing of the nanohole openings 28 may be either uniformly or randomly spaced but on average should be distributed uniformly (at least on average) across the surface of the emission surface to prevent localized concentration of emissions that may damage the emitter.
30 Depending on the tunneling material used, the nanohole openings 28 allow for

the emission of photons from the tunneling layer by providing openings for exit.

FIG. 3 illustrates an emitter 29 in accordance with an embodiment of the invention, with voltage sources operably coupled to the emitter 29. In this embodiment, the conductive transparent electron source layer 12 is disposed on a light-emitting layer 30, which is disposed on a substrate contact layer 32. The variable emitter voltage source 18 is operably coupled to a thin metal layer contact 34 and a conducting layer contact 36. A variable light emitter voltage source 38 is operably coupled to a conducting layer contact 40 and the substrate contact layer 32. The light-emitting layer 30 generates the photons 20 when the variable light emitter voltage source 38 applies a voltage across the light-emitting layer 30. The photons 20 impinge on the surface 22 of the tunneling layer 16 and are absorbed within.

In an embodiment of the invention, the light-emitting layer 30 includes silicon rich Si_xN_y . In another embodiment of the invention, the light-emitting layer 30 is TaO_2 . In an embodiment of the invention, the light-emitting layer 30 has a thickness between about 100 microns and about 1000 microns. In another embodiment of the invention, the light-emitting layer 30 has a thickness of about 500 microns. Optionally, the light-emitting layer 30 can be other light sources such as OLED (organic light emitting device), fluorescent, or LED, just to name a few.

FIG. 4 is a schematic of an exemplary integrated circuit embodiment 400 of the invention that includes at least one and typically a plurality of integrated emitters 402 (such as any one or combination of emitters the emitters of FIGs. 1-3) arranged in an array or other geometrical manner. An emitter control circuit 404 is integrated onto the integrated circuit 400 and used to operate the integrated emitters 402.

FIG. 5 is a schematic embodiment of a display application using an integrated emitter 500 of the invention. In particular, this embodiment entails a plurality of emitters 502 formed in an integrated circuit 504. Each of

the emitters 502 emits electrons, as generally illustrated by the upwardly directed arrows of FIG. 5. An anode structure 506 having a plurality of individual pixels 508 that form a display 510 receives the emitted electrons. The pixels 508 are typically a phosphor material that creates photons when struck by emissions from the emitters 502. Other components such as a power supply, a control circuit, and the like may also be provided.

FIG. 6 is an exemplary block diagram of a computer 600 that includes a microprocessor 606, a memory 608 that is coupled to the microprocessor 606, and electronic devices, a storage device 604 and a display device 602. The electronic devices are coupled to the microprocessor 606. The microprocessor 606 is capable of executing instructions from the memory 608 to allow for the transfer of data between the memory 608 and the electronic devices, such as the storage device 604 and the display device 602. At least one of the storage device 604 and the display device 602 includes an integrated circuit such as the integrated circuit 400 that has emitters 402 incorporating the invention.

A particular memory or storage device is schematically shown in FIGS. 7A and 7B. The memory device includes a plurality of flat emitters 700 of the invention that include at least a transparent electron source layer, a tunneling layer, and a thin metal layer. In this exemplary embodiment, the plurality of the flat emitters 700 are integrated into an integrated circuit 702. A lens array 704 of focusing mechanisms 705 that may be aligned with the plurality of flat emitters 700 is used to create a focused beam 706 of electrons that affects a recording surface media 708. The focusing mechanisms 705 may be an electrostatic focusing lens having an aperture in a conductor set at a predetermined voltage. The conductor voltage is typically but optionally adjustable to change the focusing effect of the focusing lens. The recording surface media 708 is linked to a mover 710 that positions the recording surface media 708 with respect to the plurality of flat emitters 700 and/or the

lens array 704. Typically, the mover 710 has a reader circuit 712 integrated within.

The reader circuit 712 is illustrated in FIG. 7B as an amplifier 714 making a first ohmic contact 716 to the recording surface media 708 and a
5 second ohmic contact 718 to the mover 710, typically a semiconductor or conductor substrate. When a focused beam 706 strikes the recording surface media 708, if the current density of the focused beam is high enough, the media is phase-changed to create an affected media area 720. When a low
10 current density focused beam 706 is applied to the recording surface media 708 surface, different rates of current flow are detected by the amplifier 714, the output of which may be used as reader output. Thus, by affecting the recording surface media 708 with the energy from the one of the plurality of flat emitters 700, information is stored in the media using structural phase
15 changed properties of the media and can be read from the media. An exemplary phase-change material is InSe.

FIG. 8 illustrates a method for enhancing electron tunneling in accordance with an embodiment of the invention. The method is applicable to any emitter in accordance with the invention, but, for purposes of illustration, will be discussed with reference to the emitter 10 of FIG. 1. The conductive
20 transparent electron source layer 12 is provided in the emitter 10 (step 802). The tunneling layer 16 is also provided in the emitter 10 (step 804). A voltage is applied to the emitter 10 to stimulate emissions (Step 806). While the voltage is applied, the surface 22 of the tunneling layer 16 is illuminated with the photons 20 through the conductive transparent electron source layer 12 to
25 enhance electron tunneling in the emitter 10 (or 27 or 29) (step 808). In step 806, the level of enhancement will depend upon the voltage applied across the tunneling layer and the amount of photons absorbed within the tunneling layer. Embodiments of the invention include use of an external source of photons, for example, as well as embodiments where a photon source that is
30 integrated with the emitter.

While specific embodiments of the present invention have been shown and described, it should be understood that other modifications, substitutions and alternatives are apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art. Such modifications, substitutions and alternatives can be made without departing
5 from the spirit and scope of the invention, which should be determined from the appended claims. For example, it will be appreciated that many applications in addition to a memory and a visual display may be practiced using an emitter of the invention.

Various features of the invention are set forth in the appended claims.